The New Common Core State Standards Assessments:

Building Awareness for Assistive Technology Specialists

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English Language Arts and Mathematics (http://www.corestandards.org/) were released in June 2010 as the outcome of work by the National Governors Association. States were encouraged to adopt the new standards as a prerequisite for applying for educational reform funding known as Race to the Top. To-date, 45 states, the District of Columbia and four territories have adopted the standards (see Figure 1).

The CCSS were designed to replace the individual content standards found in each state. The general notion of educational reform used in the CCSS is that we must increase expectations and engage students in more sophisticated thinking and problem solving in order to produce an educated work force attuned to the needs of 21st century society. Of particular concern to policymakers, business leaders and educational leaders is that, currently, the United States does not fare well on international rankings of academic achievement. One such international comparison is known as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (http://www.oecd.org/pisa/).

The release of 2012 PISA test results are scheduled for December 3, 2013. In the past, when the PISA test scores were released every two years, the event tended to provoke headlines in the United States about the poor quality of our education system. That is because the U.S. often finds itself in the top third of the rankings (United States: 18th in reading, 25th in mathematics and 23rd in science), rather than in the top three positions (like one might expect in terms of Olympic medals). The international tests suggest that a much smaller percentage of students are performing at the highest levels of achievement than are found on individual state tests. The conflicting evidence is interpreted as meaning that existing state assessments are not as rigorous as the PISA and, therefore, should be replaced with more rigorous measures of learning outcomes.

The adoption of the CCSS also set the stage for the development and implementation of a new high stakes assessment system. Because CCSS effectively changes the curriculum (C), it is expected that significant changes will also occur in instruction (I) and assessment (A). The C-I-A equation must be effectively aligned to produce the type of educational outcomes being sought through educational reform. Over the past few years, teachers and administrators have focused on learning about the new CCSS and determining how teaching and learning must change (the I part of the equation) to produce the higher outcomes found in the standards.

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The purpose of this article is to introduce readers to emerging trends and issues associated with the new generation of high-stakes assessments (the A part of the equation). Of particular interest to assistive technology specialists are factors associated with the accessibility of the new assessments. New developments are occuring on a weekly basis. As a result, the information below summarizes six critical issues that every assistive technology team needs to address during the 2013-14 school year and provides links to stay knowledgeable about the challenges and opportunities students with disabilities will encounter as they participate in the new assessments.

THE BASICS

A key principle of current educational reform efforts in the United States focuses on the use of standardized assessments to measure student learning outcomes. Over the past ten years, federal law has required these assessments be given for reading and math. The requirement, to test at least 95 percent of all students, has been particularly problematic for students with disabilities who struggle to access these paper-based assessments. However, beginning in 2014-2015, high-stakes assessments will be computer-based. This development offers new opportunities but also presents some challenges.

One of the key features of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was the emphasis on standardized assessment as a method of accountability for closing achievement gaps. However, this law, known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has yet to be reauthorized by Congress. So the Obama administration has been issuing waivers to grant states flexibility in meeting the legal requirements. To learn more about the flexibility guidelines and whether or not your state has been approved for a waiver, visit: US Department of Education Flexibility Waivers (http://www.ed.gov/esea/flexibility).
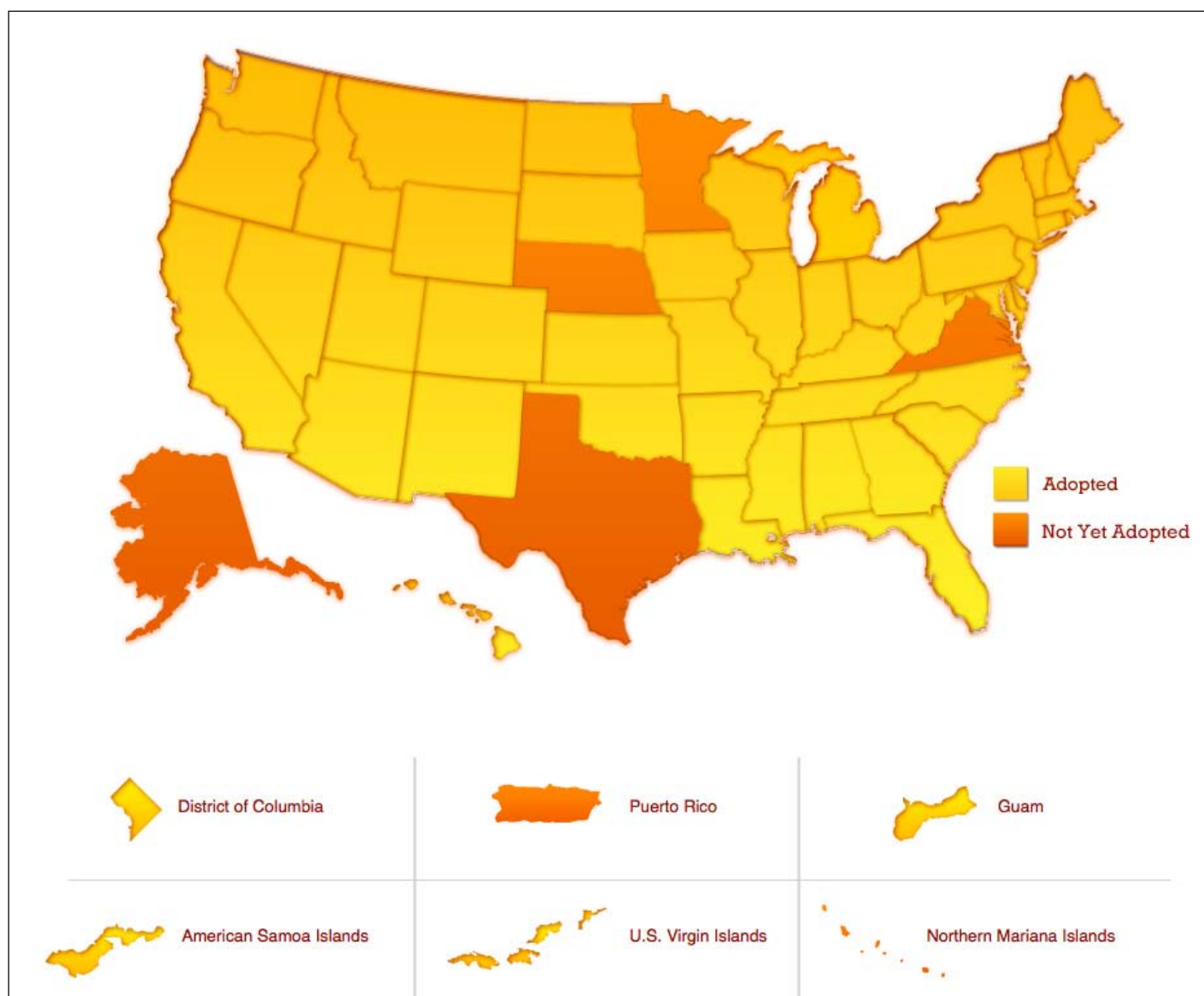

Figure 1: States in yellow on the map above have adopted the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Source: http://www.corestandards.org/in-the-states

Beginning in the 2014-15 school year, states will need to administer tests to assess student performance on the CCSS in English language arts and mathematics, thereby replacing the state-specific accountability assessments that were required under NCLB. In anticipation of this transition, in September 2010, the U.S. Department of Education awarded approximately $400 million dollars of Race to the Top funding to two consortia, PARRC and Smarter Balanced, to develop a new generation of high-stakes tests that would allow states to implement a new accountability system. A month later, two additional awards were made, for approximately $67 million dollars, to two consortia that would create a new generation of alternate assessments on alternate achievement standards, aligned to the CCSS for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities: The National Center and State Collaborative Partnership (NCSC) and The Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment System Consortium (DLM).

Whereas each consortia is approaching the test development process in a slightly different way, there is the possibility that students could take up to five tests each year: (1) Diagnostic Assessment (early fall) to diagnose skill deficits and grade level baseline performance, (2-4) Progress Monitoring Assessment (n=3, fall, winter, early spring) to provide formative information on academic growth and ascertain their trend line is on target to meet the end-of-year progress goal, and (5) Summative Assessment (late spring) to be used for accountability purposes. However, this may change as a result of budget limitations that may affect both the development proces, as well as how much states and school districts can afford to spend on the new assessments (estimated to be $22-27 per child per year). Another element of concern centers on the fact that many districts have already incurred considerable expense by adopting progress monitoring formative assessments; however, these assessments are not necessarily aligned with the summative assessment.

CRITICAL ISSUE #1: UNDERSTAND WHICH CONSORTIA YOUR STATE HAS PARTNERED WITH

States implementing the CCSS have been given the opportunity to join one or more consortia to help guide the development of

Consortia	Focus	Website - Learn More
Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM)	The new DLM Alternate Assessment System will let students with the most significant cognitive disabilities show what they know in ways that traditional multiple-choice tests cannot.	http://dynamiclearningmaps.org/
The National Center and State Collaborative Partnership (NCSC)	The National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) is applying the lessons learned from the past decade of research on alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) to develop a multi-state comprehensive assessment system for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.	http://www.ncscpartners.org/
Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Colleges and Careers (PARRC)	The new K-12 assessments will build a pathway to college and career readiness by the end of high school, mark students' progress toward this goal from 3rd grade up, and provide teachers with timely information to inform instruction and provide student support.	http://www.parcconline.org/
Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)	The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium is a state-led consortium working to develop next-generation assessments that accurately measure student progress toward college- and career-readiness. The work of Smarter Balanced is guided by the belief that a high-quality assessment system can provide information and tools for teachers and schools to improve instruction and help students succeed – regardless of disability, language or subgroup.	http://www.smarterbalanced.org/

Table 1 - Four consortia responsible for developing the next generation of high stakes tests for assessing student performance on the CCSS.

the new assessments or to create their own assessment system. As a result, it is critically important that each assistive technology team understand which consortia their state has partnered with in order to begin monitoring the field testing, technology requirements, sample tests, etc. Table 1 provides a summary of the four consortia. Notice that your state may be involved in one consortia for the general CCSS assessment and a different consortia for the alternate assessment (sometimes referred to as the one percent test for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities).

CRITICAL ISSUE #2: UNDERSTAND THE TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS FOR THE NEW COMPUTER-BASED TESTS

One problem with paper-based assessments is the extensive time required for scoring and reporting the results. Because the new generation of assessments will be computer-based, this provides new opportunities for developers to expand the accessibility of the assessments. As a result, it is necessary for each assistive technology team to understand the technology platform requirements for each type of assessment that their students may be required to take. Table 2 provides links to the guidance documents that have been issued by each consortia to assist school districts in making appropriate investments in technology infrastructure.

Unfortunately, to-date, many school districts' assistive technology specialists have not been involved in planning meetings with the district assessment director, special education director and educational technology network manager concerning the implementation of the new assessments. Significant attention must be devoted to ensuring that adequate consideration has been provided for the array of assistive technology devices used by students and that such systems will be compatible with the technology-based assessment platform.

CRITICAL ISSUE #3: UNDERSTAND THE ACCOMMODATION POLICIES FOR THE ASSESSMENTS DEVELOPED BY THE CONSORTIA YOUR STUDENTS ARE INVOLVED WITH AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY USE (OR NON-USE)

The consortia have been challenged to design the new assessments using principles of universal design. While this offers

Consortia	Technology Requirements
Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM)	http://dynamiclearningmaps.org/pdf/DLM%20System%20Technology%20Requirements.pdf
The National Center and State Collaborative Partnership (NCSC)	http://www.k12center.org/rsc/pdf/National_Center_and_State_Collaborative_Summary.pdf
Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Colleges and Careers (PARRC)	http://www.parcconline.org/technology
Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)	http://www.smarterbalanced.org/smarter-balanced-assessments/technology/

Table 2 - Each consortium has released guidelines for school districts to ensure that the proper technology infrastructure is in place to allow students to take the computer-based assessments.

Consortia	Accommodation Policies
Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM)	
The National Center and State Collaborative Partnership (NCSC)	
Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Colleges and Careers (PARRC)	http://parcconline.org/parcc-accessibility-accommodations-and-fairness
Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)	http://www.smarterbalanced.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/SmarterBalanced_Guidelines_091113.pdf

Table 3 - Links to consortia accommodation policies.

significant opportunity for enhanced accessibility, it also means that assistive technologies cannot be overlooked.

The two consortia developing the alternative assessments (DLM and NCSC) are seeking to design their assessment platform so that it can have universal access features, like increased font size or text-to-speech available, in addition to being compatible with assistive technologies. However, as of early October 2013 they have not released accommodation policies to govern the use of assistive technologies.

PARRC and SBAC have released accommodation policy guidelines (see Table 3) that will be subsequently refined during field testing (more about this issue below). It is essential that each assistive technology team become familiar with these policies and the implications for what assistive

technologies will be allowed and what types of tools will not be permitted. An area of particular controversy centers on embedded supports that may provide function similar to assistive technology but are being made available to all students in the context of universal design (i.e., notepad, text-to-speech, highlighting tool). Assistive technology teams must carefully evaluate these guidelines in order to anticipate the unintended consequences for their students and provide feedback to their consortium and state department of education.

CRITICAL ISSUE #4: RE-EXAMINING THE IDEA MANDATE TO CONSIDER ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY WHEN PLANNING EACH STUDENT'S IEP IN THE CONTEXT OF EACH STUDENT'S PARTICIPATION IN THE NEW COMPUTER-BASED 2014-15 READING AND MATH ASSESSMENTS

In the past, test developers determined what assistive technology was and was not permissible with the test they created. Generally, this perspective defaulted to banning interventions that could potentially alter construct validity (i.e., Should text-to-speech be allowed to be used on a reading test?). This caused considerable confusion relative to IEPs that documented a student's need for assistive technology because of a reading/learning disability.

At the present time, there is still a good deal of uncertainty about how and when assistive technology will be permitted with the new assessments. As a result, it is critically important that each assistive technology team participate in each IEP meeting to determine (a) the need for assistive technology in the new assessments and to (b) properly document these findings on the IEP so that the IEP is current and accurate. Since each state will determine a deadline for qualifying students with disabilities for accommodations for each testing period, it is essential that the IEP reflect the student's assessment accessibility needs. This means that the profession must become grounded in evidence-based decision-making concerning when and how students benefit from assistive technology.

CRITICAL ISSUE #5: VOLUNTEER TO PARTICIPATE IN FIELD TESTING OF THE NEW ASSESSMENTS

Each consortium is engaged in an iterative process of development and field testing. Field tests are underway during Fall 2013 and will be conducted again in Spring 2014. As a result, assistive technology teams should work with their special education director and assessment director to volunteer to serve as a field test site in order to ensure that students with disabilities, who use assistive technology, are invited to participate in the field test (see Table 4).

At the present time, some test accommodations will only be accessible by an adult turning on the features before the student begins the test. For students who use assistive technology, it may be physically impossible for an assistive technology specialist

Consortia	Field Testing Plans
Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM)	http://dynamiclearningmaps.org/moreinfo/external_pilot.html
The National Center and State Collaborative Partnership (NCSC)	http://www.ncscpartners.org/Media/Default/ PDFs/NCSC-Policymaker-General-Handout-4-Pages-June-2013.pdf
Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Colleges and Careers (PARRC)	http://www.parcconline.org/field-test
Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)	http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/smarterfieldtest.asp

Table 4 - Links to consortia field testing schedules.

Consortia	Sample Test/Items
Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM)	http://dynamiclearningmaps.org/unc/texts/index.html
The National Center and State Collaborative Partnership (NCSC)	
Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Colleges and Careers (PARRC)	http://www.parcconline.org/samples/english-language-artsliteracy/grade-10-elaliteracy
Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)	http://sampleitems.smarterbalanced.org/ itempreview/sbac/ELA.htm

Table 5 - Links to consortia sample tests and sample test items.

to activate these features for all students that need them, in all classrooms and in all buildings when the tests are simultaneously administered. This is just one of many implementation issues that has been identified in early field tests. There is much more to be learned about the array of devices, operating systems and assistive technologies that could render a technology-based assessment platform inaccessible. As a result, assistive technology teams must be willing to devote significant time and energy to identifying these problematic issues and advocating for their proper resolution.

CRITICAL ISSUE #6: REVIEW SAMPLE TESTS AND SAMPLE ITEMS WITH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS WHO USE ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY TO EVALUATE POTENTIAL ACCESSIBILITY BARRIERS

Most of the consortia have released a few test preparation items to allow students, parents and teachers the opportunity to begin examining the types of questions that

will be found on the assessments, as well as practice tests (see Table 5). As a result, assistive technology teams must become familiar with these practice tests and analyze the content and format for accessibility barriers. At the present time, little is known about the accessibility of the new assessments as development continues.

As noted earlier, assistive technology teams must be willing to devote significant time and energy to identifying problematic issues in the design and delivery of the new computer-based assessments and advocating for their proper resolution. It is essential that the profession share their experience and advocate for improved test accessibility. ∎